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ABSTRACT

The Raising Quality and Achievement Program is a 3-year initiative to support further education (FE) colleges in the United Kingdom in their drive to improve students' achievement and the quality of provision. The program offers the following: (1) quality information and advice; (2) onsite support for individual colleges; (3) help with benchmarking; (4) college-based development programs; (5) leadership assistance for governors, principals, and team leaders; and (6) regional practitioner networks and quality forums to develop and promote good practice. During the project, the objectives of raising student achievement have been re-evaluated and the policy assumptions underpinning discussions of student achievement have been identified. Data on the retention and achievement rates at all FE colleges in the United Kingdom have been collected, and their reliability has been assessed. The assessment revealed that achievements are being underreported for several reasons, including the incapacity of many FE colleges' management information systems (MIS) and the low priority given by some teachers to recording achievement data in MIS. The question of how high to aim when striving to improve student achievement was explored, and examples of successful application of the following strategies in various types of FE institutions and programs were identified: classroom-level interactions; learning pathway; and college policy and leadership. (Contains 13 references.) (MN)

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FEDA Further Education Development Agency

Aiming at achievement

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this publication is to provide an interim report on FEDA's research into improving student achievement. It provides answers to some difficult questions:

- What do we mean by achievement in further education?
- Where have we got to?
- Can we rely on the data?
- How high do we need to aim?
- What is emerging from research into effective practice?
- How does FEDA's work fit into this agenda?

This report is part of FEDA's *Raising quality and achievement* programme. This is a three-year initiative, funded by the DfEE, to support colleges in their drive to improve students' achievement and the quality of provision. The programme offers:

- **Quality information and advice service.** An information, advice and support helpline, underpinned by a database of good practice.
- **Quality improvement team.** On-site support for individual colleges in developing and implementing their plans to raise standards.
- **Benchmarking and information.** Help for college managers to benchmark their activities, improve processes and make better use of data.
- **Development projects.** One hundred college-based projects to increase the range of improvement strategies and share case studies.
- **Leadership and governance.** Help for governors, principals and team leaders to use their leadership skills to raise standards.
- **Best practice.** Regional practitioner networks and quality forums to develop and promote good practice.

The programme is run in collaboration with the Association of Colleges (AoC) and operates in close liasion with the FEFC's Quality Improvement Unit. For further details please contact: Anna Reisenberger, Manager, *Raising quality and achievement* programme. Tel: 0207 840 5323 Fax: 0207 840 5401 e-mail: areisenb@feda.ac.uk

2. What do we mean by achievement in further education?

Student achievement has risen to the top of the political agenda for further education. Rightly, it is seen partly as an end in itself. Numerous commentators have pointed out the relatively large percentage of 16 year-olds who leave full-time education with few or no qualifications. Others have deplored the poor performance of 'UK plc' in terms of the qualifications and skills of its workforce, particularly at level 3 and at HNC/HND level.

Raising achievement is thus seen as a good thing in itself: more skilled and better qualified citizens and supply-side support to develop a high added-value, knowledge-driven, internationally competitive economy.

Raising levels of achievement can also be seen as the means to a number of different ends:

- reducing social exclusion by ensuring that all young people have a stake in the labour market
- providing a second chance for people who failed to achieve at school
- promoting adult success in formal education and hence greater confidence in and commitment to lifelong learning and development
- reducing the cost of failure in post-compulsory education provision
- improving quality and driving up standards
- securing the best possible return on investment in post-compulsory education and training.

The following policy assumptions underpin these discussions of student achievement:

- achievement is associated with gaining qualifications
- qualifications are seen as the primary goal of programmes of study
- qualification-bearing programmes are seen as the most desirable form of publicly supported education
- measures of institutional performance are equated largely with completion and achievement rates.

These new policy assumptions have eclipsed (or at least suspended) several longstanding educational debates. The polarities of training *versus* education, vocational *versus* liberal education, community *versus* institutionally focused provision, academic *versus* applied skills have largely been displaced by a new, overwhelming priority: more and higher qualifications. For many part-time students, however, greater clarity around policy objectives gives rise to greater uncertainty around the monitoring of policy implementation and around measures of institutional performance. These issues are pursued in Section 3.

This new (and narrower) focus on qualifications has intensified arguments around a different set of issues. These are set out in Table 1 below.

Within a system that equates achievement with qualifications, these debates will become even more significant. They will, therefore, inform any assessment of progress to date and, by extension, the outline of future work.

Table 1. Summary of arguments around qualifications

Issue	Polarity	Argument
Educational and social deprivation: principles	College (or school) *vs* 'home'	The nub of this debate is the relative importance of social/family factors in student achievement. Discussion in the FE sector is muted compared with schools where there is a substantial argument around school targets, standards and inspections. Critics of OFSTED inspections have remarked that 'failing' schools are disproportionately located in deprived, inner-city areas.
Educational and social deprivation: measures	Postcodes *vs* some other indicator of educational and social deprivation	The discussion mirrors that in the school sector around entitlement to free school meals as a proxy for disadvantage. Proponents concede the importance of educational and social deprivation. The argument is between those who favour postcodes and those who favour previous attainment as an index of disadvantage.
Widening participation	Participation *vs* standards	This debate was explored but not resolved in the Dearing report on post-16 qualifications. Essentially, advocates of wider access and participation have a different emphasis from those who want to raise standards and increase rigour. In practice, the argument revolves around modes and principles of assessment, especially for learners who have not been successful at school and who view tests and exams with considerable misgiving.
Examination league tables	Raw *vs* value-added scores	By stripping out differences between college cohorts, value-added analysis should facilitate 'like-with-like' comparisons. Critics of value-added approaches argue that parents and other stakeholders neither understand nor want such information.
Measuring achievement	The possibility *vs* the impossibility of measuring year-on-year improvements in achievement	The main post-16 argument revolves around whether standards are being maintained, have improved or indeed have declined, as the number of qualifications achieved and the levels of achievement have increased. There is a further discussion in the schools sector between OFSTED and QCA about the practicalities of measuring improvement and achievement.

3. Student achievement: where have we got to?

Any discussion on student achievement is inextricably bound up with issues of information and data capture.

We currently have three years of detailed information in England from the individualised student record (ISR) and less detailed information in Scotland and Wales.

The ISR seems to indicate a particular achievement problem. Achievement rates are relatively low. This is surprising in that what is being measured is pass rates among those students who complete their programmes. Withdrawn and transferred students have already been removed from the calculation. The most recent figures for England are set out below in Table 2 and show that average achievement rates for long qualifications at levels 1–3 vary between 58% and 76%. In all cases, achievement rates are lower than the corresponding average retention rates for long qualifications at the same level.

The second major problem is that there is a much greater variation across colleges in achievement rates than in retention rates. The following data are taken from FEFC (1998a). Retention rates shown are from the first census date to completion as opposed to 'in-year continuation rates'.

The 75th percentile indicates the retention or achievement rate which the top quarter of colleges meet or surpass. What emerges from this data is that there is a much greater range of college performance around achievement than around retention.

The small gap between 75th percentile and the average for retention indicates that the performance of the top 25% of colleges is relatively close to the average. For all three levels, however, and across both age ranges, the gap between the average and the performance of the top 25% of colleges is significantly greater in respect of achievement.

The same point can be demonstrated graphically in Figures 1 and 2 on page 4. It is evident that:

- there is a much greater range of achievement rates than retention rates
- it is not just a handful of atypical colleges that give rise to the greater range of achievement rates
- rather, most colleges are distributed evenly across the wide range of achievement rates.

Table 2. 1996/97 benchmarking data: retention and achievement rates: all colleges

Source: FEFC, 1998a

		16–18-year-olds		19-year-olds and older	
		Retention rates (%)	Achievement rates (%)	Retention rates (%)	Achievement rates (%)
Level 1 long qualifications	average	81	59	80	58
	75th percentile	88	88	92	83
Level 2 long qualifications	average	77	63	77	61
	75th percentile	85	84	86	85
Level 3 long qualifications	average	78	76	78	59
	75th percentile	86	86	86	82

Figure 1. Full-time student in-year retention rate 1996/97

Source: FEFC, 1998b

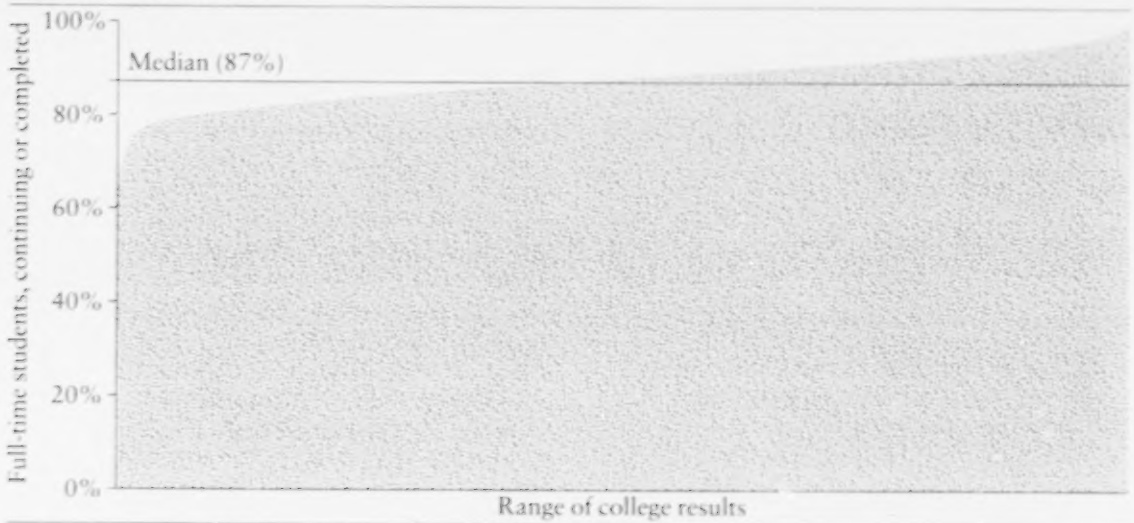
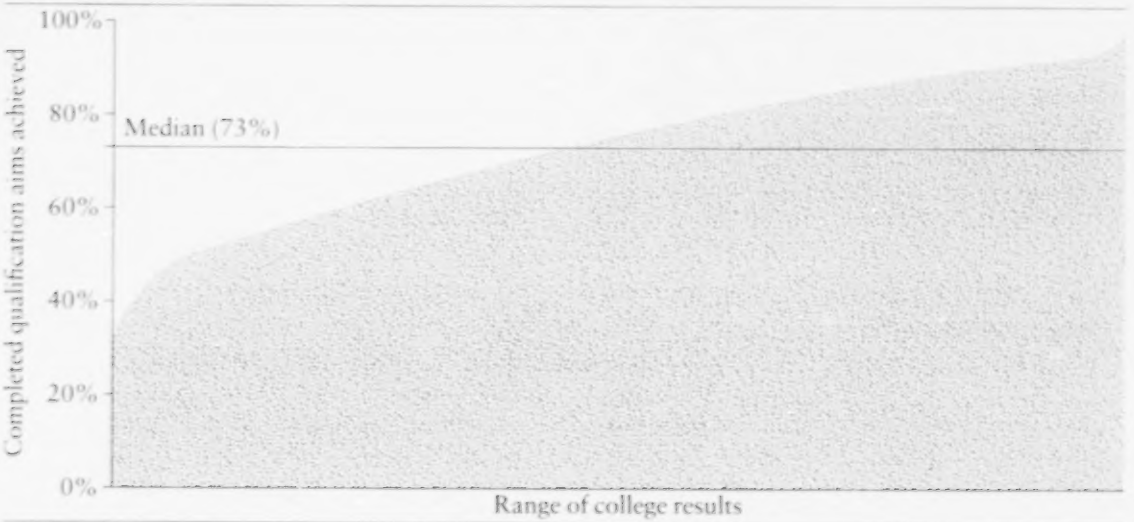


Figure 2. Achievement rates: long qualifications 1996/97

Source: FEFC, 1998b



4. Can we rely on the data?

A note of caution must be sounded at this point on the accuracy of ISR data. It has improved over time (for example, 1996/97 data is more reliable than 1994/95), but there is a lot of apocryphal and anecdotal evidence to suggest that it is still 'dirty'. The issue of data reliability can be illustrated quickly by reference to published statistics. As we saw in the previous section, the relationship between achievement and social disadvantage is an important issue. If we examine the 41 FE colleges with the largest proportion of their students recruited from areas of high disadvantage, we can explore the relationship between social and educational disadvantage and other performance indicators.

The problem is that the FEFC has officially expressed doubts about the most current achievement data for nine of these colleges ('under-estimated' or 'not agreed'). In a further 14 colleges, the variation in the percentage of qualification aims achieved from the previous year (1995/96) is more than 20% (plus or minus) (FEFC, 1998b) – a degree of change that is not credible. This means that 23 of 41 colleges in this group (56%) have achievement data of doubtful validity.

It is widely believed, moreover, that achievements are under-reported for three main reasons:

- the incapacity of many college management information systems (MIS) to cope with student achievement data from roll-on, roll-off programmes
- related difficulties in some MIS in recording achievement where this is delayed to the beginning of a new academic year
- a lack of priority assigned to recording achievement data on MIS by some teachers.

Even if data are accurate, there are further difficulties of interpretation and analysis. Four examples demonstrate this point.

Example 1

All ISR achievement data relates to the achievement (or otherwise) of qualification aims but the funding methodology rewards the multiplication of qualification aims for each student. Colleges A and B may have the same achievement rates. In College A, most students may be pursuing one main qualification aim and a high proportion may be failing to achieve this. In College B, by contrast, most students may be enrolled for two or more qualification aims. One of these will be, in their eyes, their main goal. All the students at College B achieve this main qualification aim. College B nevertheless has the same achievement rate as College A because of the volume of subsidiary qualification aims that are not being achieved. How should one interpret the data in this example? From a funding perspective, College B is performing at the same level as College A. From the perspective of students, however, College B may be seen as much more successful.

Example 2

In sixth-form colleges C and D, two identical groups of students are taught the same range of A-levels (with one exception) equally well and yet average total point scores for students in College C are higher than those in College D. The difference is that students at College C take General Studies A-level and those at College D do not. There is a difference between the two colleges but it should not be inferred that key teaching and learning processes in College D are any worse than those at College C.

Example 3

In our third example, College F has higher achievement rates than College E, and both colleges have the same (high) Kennedy weighting. Is College F out-performing College E? The simple answer is: we do not know. Even assuming that the curriculum offer and qualification strategies are sufficiently similar to enable like-for-like comparisons at least three competing interpretations are possible:

- College F is outperforming College E; there is a strong relationship between postcodes and outcomes and College F is more successful in helping disadvantaged students achieve qualifications.
- College F is more successful than College E but this has nothing to do with postcodes, either because there is no relationship between postcodes and student outcomes, or because there is no effect on achievement rates (as distinct from retention rates).

- College E is either as successful or more successful than College F, because there is a very strong relationship between disadvantage and achievement but the postcode measure of disadvantage is too crude to capture the greater degree of disadvantage among the College E students.

Example 4

Finally, Colleges G and H have similar proportions of part-time enrolments but dissimilar curricula. In College G, programmes are geared to people in work who want to advance their careers through qualifications. For a substantial proportion of students in College H, however, accreditation has a low priority. Colleges G and H may have the same achievement rates but, arguably, College G may be performing less well than College H.

This brief discussion is not intended to cause despair. Nor is it a counsel of unobtainable perfection. It does suggest, however, that inferences must be treated with caution. It also suggests an urgent need for some good empirical research that could clarify the issues of data revealed in Examples 1 and 3 and test the assumptions contained in Examples 3 and 4.

5. Raising achievement: how high do we need to aim?

There are two different and complementary ways of answering this question. One is a largely pragmatic approach to securing incremental improvements by reference to national benchmarks, relevant comparator information from inside or outside the college and levels of achievement in previous years.

All of this is logical, sensible and practicable. It underpins much of the work undertaken by FEDA and, for that matter, the strategies developed by funding and inspection agencies to:

- place retention and achievement at the heart of funding methodologies
- create inspection criteria, inspect against those criteria and publish inspection reports, partly predicated on student achievements
- emphasise achievement and retention within the criteria for awarding accredited status
- collect and publish benchmark data
- require colleges to set improvement targets.

However, although this approach is useful for securing incremental improvements and levering up averages, it does not help to answer the fundamental questions:

- How high should we be aiming?
- Where should we be focusing our efforts?

To resolve these questions we need some sort of model to represent student achievement. As the forthcoming FEDA report *Improving college effectiveness* (Somekh *et al.*, 1999) makes clear, we do not have a ready-made and widely accepted model of why and how students achieve in post-compulsory education. Instead we have a plethora of models, some of which have a larger evidence base than others.

Such models underpin all the current stimulating discussions that continue in further education concerning credit frameworks, maintenance of standards, information and communications technology (ICT), flexible curricula and resource-based learning,

qualification pathways, key, core, basic and transferable skills, modularity, the role of advice and guidance, vocational relevance, competency-based qualifications, principles of assessment and feedback, etc. All those concerned in debating and implementing these developments are making implicit or explicit references to models of student achievement. Although many of these models may be congruent or complementary, others are not.

In the schools sector, not just in the UK but also internationally, there is a much larger research base and a more developed consensus around models of student achievement and, hence, school effectiveness and improvement. This is a current and complex discussion, but at the risk of over-simplification, the factors that contribute to achievement at school are, in descending order of importance:

- student characteristics
- classroom-level interactions
- school-level policy and leadership
- national and local frameworks and policies.

Student characteristics include home environment, education and occupations of parents, student ability, etc. In many studies this can account for as much as 75% of the factors affecting achievement.

Classroom-level interactions include the design and delivery of teaching and learning sessions, schemes of work, specification of learning outcomes, grouping procedures and teacher behaviours.

School-level policy and leadership include factors that provide the conditions for teaching and learning: rules and agreements about teaching, timetabling, homework, approaches to quality, influence on school culture and ethos, arrangements to manage and supervise teaching.

Finally, at local and national level, policies on the school year, teacher training, funding formulae, etc., all ultimately affect student achievement. In terms of relative importance, however, after student characteristics, the next two most important factors are classroom-level interactions and school-level policies and leadership. This is represented diagrammatically in Figure 3 overleaf.

This is a highly condensed summary of a complicated argument. For further reading, the most accessible text is probably *Improving college effectiveness* (*op. cit.*). The fullest account of the research on which this model is based, is contained in Creemers (1994). There are suggestions for further reading in the reference section.

The question that immediately arises is: can this model be transferred to the college sector? In one critical respect, the schools sector, both in the UK and elsewhere, differs from the FE sector. There is a major and often unspoken assumption underpinning all such models in the schools sector that relates to how achievement is being measured. In the schools sector, student achievement is calculated at any one time by reference to a single measure of achievement (KS1, KS2, KS3, A*–C GCSE scores etc.).

The unique feature of further education, however, and what distinguishes it from schools (and for that matter higher education), is that it uses multiple measures of achievement. Thus, at many colleges, there are students enrolled on qualification programmes at entry, foundation, intermediate, advanced, higher national and indeed degree and post-graduate level.

This implies that student characteristics will be less significant in colleges than in schools in respect of student achievement. For as long as students are placed on appropriate programmes and those programmes are designed and delivered effectively, they should succeed.

There is a reverse argument. It might be argued that the FE student population is more challenging and demanding than the school population. It is hugely varied and changing; most students are adults and for them formal education may be a secondary activity. This may be true and could have the effect of increasing again the relative influence of the student characteristics factor. On the other hand, FE students (unlike school pupils) do not have to be in college. A distinguishing feature of further education is that students choose to study. They are thus a more self-selecting group than the whole-age cohort involved in school-level study. This would have the effect of reducing or diminishing the significance of student characteristics. The inference here is that, although we cannot yet say by how much, student characteristics may well be a less important factor in student achievement in further education than in the school sector.

A second difference between schools and colleges is that, arguably, college-level functions (structure, curriculum offer and model, leadership, culture, etc.) are more complex and managers have more discretion than in schools. This would imply the greater importance of this factor in colleges than in schools.

A third difference is that, in the main, there are few intermediate fuctions between the classroom level and the school level. The student experience of school is fundamentally determined in the classroom. In colleges, by contrast, there is a multitude of mediating processes (e.g. marketing and recruitment, advice and guidance, initial assessment, learning support, resource-based learning, student support, tutoring etc.). As these are processes that stand between college-level policy and leadership and classroom-level interactions, a tentative title for them might be 'learning pathway'.

The final difference between the FE and school sectors is this: by the same token that student characteristics may be less important, classroom interactions are likely to be more important.

This argument is represented diagrammatically in Figure 3. The relative importance of the factors affecting student achievement in schools is shown in the left-hand column. There is substantial empirical evidence to support this model. The factors affecting student achievement in colleges are shown in the right-hand column. The demarcation lines between college factors are marked as dotted lines because the model is tentative and at this stage hypothetical, to be validated or disproved by further research and analysis.

There is at least one major objection to the argument that we should be setting high targets for achievement. It is that the argument is based on the implicit assumption that all college students, especially adult part-time students, want to achieve qualifications. There is substantial anecdotal evidence to indicate that many adults drop out of programmes altogether to avoid tests or exams or absent themselves from assessment activities.

Figure 3. The relative importance of factors affecting student achievement

In schools	In colleges
Single measure of achievement	Multiple measures of achievement
National level	National level
School level	College level
Classroom interaction	Learning pathway
Student characteristics	Classroom interaction
	Student characteristics

This objection has considerable force but can be met in one of two ways. The criteria for eligibility for public funding could be tightened further to exclude courses that are not primarily focused on achieving qualifications. This option would run counter to the other policy objectives of widening participation and lifelong learning and is therefore unlikely.

A second response would involve some empirical work to verify the existence and identify the characteristics of such a group of adult learners to:

- develop some more appropriate assessment and accreditation methods
- create alternative measures of achievement
- remove the group altogether from calculations of achievement rates.

Several implications flow from this discussion.

1. We should be aiming high: if students are placed, supported and taught appropriately, most of them should be able to succeed.
2. The factors that colleges can control or influence and that affect student achievement most directly are: classroom-level interactions, management of the learning pathway and college-level policy and leadership.
3. These factors will need to be in alignment to maximise achievement.
4. Efforts devoted to improving the quality of classroom interactions and of mechanisms to manage the learning pathway will have the greatest influence on raising achievement.
5. Actions at the level of college policy and leadership that will have the greatest influence on student achievement will be those that create conditions for effective teaching and learning and for management of learning pathways.
6. Further education may be able to learn from empirical research in the schools sector about classroom interactions (pedagogy) and college-level processes (leadership etc.).
7. Schools may be able to learn something from colleges about managing the learning pathway.

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6. What is emerging from research into effective practice?

A brief overview of the messages emerging from research is that:

- Colleges and adult education services are placing much greater emphasis and managerial priority on efforts to improve achievement and retention.
- Strategies to improve retention are generally more widespread and better developed than strategies to improve achievement.
- Strategies to improve retention usually combine a cross-college dimension with specific actions in programme areas. Achievement strategies, by contrast, tend to be more piecemeal and more confined to individual curriculum areas and sometimes to individual programmes or courses.
- Some sixth-form colleges provide a notable exception to these observations: they have strategies to raise achievement both across the college and in individual subject areas.
- These sixth-form colleges may be exceptions because they are relatively small, have robust and well-developed, value-added methodologies for A-levels, a relatively settled A-level curriculum and focus on academic achievement as a key element of their competitive strategy.

Table 3. Raising achievement: examples of successful practice

Type of college	Strategies		
	Classroom-level interactions	Learning pathway	College policy and leadership
FE college: Faculty of Humanities	• Evening language students: development of OCN accreditation and a resource-based learning centre. • National Diploma Media Studies: review of staffing, programme structure, timetabling and assessment practice and development of open-access IT. • A-levels: tailored initial assessments; diagnostic phase in the first six weeks; improved tutoring and attendance monitoring; introduction of modular syllabuses.	• A-levels: raising entry requirements; group and subject interviewing; increased parental and careers service involvement; early identification of at-risk students; twice-yearly report sent to parents; new strategies to address learning support needs of students.	• Media Studies: £50k investment in accommodation and equipment but only after improvement process had begun. • A levels: A-level Humanities provision centralised in a single faculty from four departments.
FE college: adult part-time courses	• All courses have targets for enrolment, retention and (for Schedule 2 courses) pass rates; support before exams, including revision sessions increased; 'cause for concern' courses are subject to quality procedures including register checks, student questionnaires, tutor observations, analysis of prior advice and guidance and on-course support.	• Pre-enrolment advice and guidance improved; interviews introduced for many courses; more emphasis on individual support.	• Insistence on having rock-solid data through close monitoring of register completion; 2% of salary bill devoted to training and development of predominantly part-time staff; emphasis on continuous improvement through quality procedures, Investors in People and Chartermark.

continued overleaf

Table 3 continued

Type of college	Strategies		
	Classroom-level interactions	Learning pathway	College policy and leadership
Sixth-form college: A-levels and Intermediate GNVQs	• Abandonment of full-time GCSE resits in favour of Intermediate GNVQs. • GNVQ programmes restructured to six-week blocks followed by seventh catch-up week. • A-levels: introduction of modular A-levels. • A-levels and GNVQs: changes to induction and immediate follow-up of first absence.	• A-levels: intensive use of value-added for formative purposes and change of tutoring model; enhanced use of taster and pre-enrolment programmes; extra support for students whose home language is not English.	• Revamp of management information systems and introduction of electronic registration; use of value-added analysis for curriculum management; introduction of classroom observation.
FE college: Foundation GNVQs	• Creation of a single programme based around key skills; strengthened initial assessment; increased curriculum hours for courses and introduction of structured residential experiences; development of team approach to teaching with a full timetable and no gaps; better balance of theory and practice; multiple accreditation opportunities linked to regular celebration of achievement.	• Introduction of learning coordinators on a ratio of 1:30 to monitor attendance, tutor, assist with assignments, find work placements etc.; provision of specialist learning support for literacy, numeracy and dyslexia.	• Foundation programmes moved from five different curriculum areas into a single programme; provision of additional support resources.
FE college: GNVQ Leisure and Tourism	• Better team working and improved course organisation; changed sequencing of course work and work placements; creation of three pathways with different career orientations and appropriate new additional units; clarification of course tutor role.	• Introduction of more rigorous selection procedures; enhanced absence monitoring and follow-up and improved exit procedures.	• Raising awareness of reasons for withdrawal and failure; greater focus on achievement and retention at faculty board and college management team meetings.

- There are many examples of successful practice from all programme areas and levels of programme, types of college and, indeed, parts of the UK.
- Examples of successful practice in managing the learning pathway are perhaps less widespread than improvements in classroom interactions, and, to a lesser degree, in college policy and leadership.
- This appears to be caused by continuing difficulties in specifying relevant indicators, and hence standards and targets (so that even if guidance services are particularly effective, it is difficult to measure their influence).
- Successful strategies appear to be congruent with the model of student achievement sketched in the previous section.

The outcomes of FEDA's project on raising achievement will be written up in more detail but to give a flavour of the work, examples of successful practice in five colleges that have raised levels of achievement in targeted areas are set out in Table 3 on pages 9 and 10.

Three features of the case studies are especially striking. Firstly, the different initiatives seem to fit readily into the student achievement model sketched in the previous section. Secondly, the strategies are operating at different levels: at institutional, faculty, programme and course level respectively. Thirdly, despite the differences in focus and content, all the strategies have complementary elements at classroom, learning pathway and college levels. This does not prove or validate the model sketched in the previous section, but it offers some persuasive evidence that the model may be of some use.

7. How does FEDA's work fit into this agenda?

Improving college effectiveness

On FEDA's behalf, the University of Huddersfield has surveyed the views of principals and summarised work in the different traditions of school effectiveness, school improvement and college research. This will be published as *Improving college effectiveness* (Somekh *et al.*, 1999).

Raising achievement

In a recent study, over 50 colleges and adult education services shared their experience of successful strategies for raising achievement and retention at a series of conferences and expert seminars. A report is being compiled and will be available in late 1999.

Spotlight on learning

A third major initiative which focuses on effective practice within subject disciplines is *Spotlight on learning*. This research is based on the experience of practitioners and follows extensive consultations within the sector. Publications contain a wealth of learning and teaching materials and are designed to provide support for classroom-level interactions. Two manuals (*Psychology and sociology* and *English and communications*) have already been published. Work is continuing on materials to support:

- Agriculture
- Basic skills
- Childcare
- Construction crafts
- Dance studies
- ESOL
- Fashion and textiles
- Finance and accounting
- Hairdressing
- Maths
- Mechanical, general and aeronautical engineering
- Music
- Science
- Sport and recreational activity

Raising quality and achievement

The *Raising quality and achievement* programme, sponsored by the DfEE, will be a key focus of FEDA's work in the short term. Planned jointly by FEDA and AoC to complement measures taken by inspection and funding agencies to raise standards, this contains six strands of practical activity, and a research strand. The practical activities include:

- Best-practice networks aimed at curriculum leaders and cross-college managers. Their objective is to provide a supportive framework to share effective practice in improving retention and achievement.
- Development projects: over a three-year period, FEDA will sponsor a large number of projects to improve quality and raise achievement. Models, tools and materials arising from these projects will be widely disseminated.
- Leadership for achievement to develop college leaders through a mixture of action learning, college twinning and accredited training.
- An advisory centre operated by AoC to provide a confidential information, advice and referral service by telephone and e-mail.
- A quality improvement team to provide help to colleges where it is most needed, mainly through consultancy.
- Benchmarking: this service will design and pilot benchmarking tools and support the development of effective practice in the sector.

Research

FEDA is undertaking an extensive research programme with regular reports to the sector, which will incorporate findings from the new initiatives.

The programme is driven by the need to provide some robust solutions to the pressing problems identified in this report. The problems and planned research activities are listed (in no particular order) in Table 4 below.

Self-assessment

FEDA's most recent publication on self-assessment is *Self-assessment in practice* (FEDA, 1998). This is a multimedia pack which includes guidance and staff development activities on how to self-assess for further improvement, and a video on classroom observation. It is based on a number of development projects. More recently (FEDA, 1999) FEDA has published *Measuring performance – improving quality* and *More and better for less*, which explore more specific aspects of improvements. All are relevant to the improvement of achievement.

Quality forums

FEDA runs termly Quality forums in Taunton, Coventry, London, Crewe and Leeds and a Quality network for Wales. Over 300 colleges belong, and forum meetings discuss and share good practice in self-assessment and improvement.

Table 4. Issues around achievement

Achievement problems	Planned research activity
What are the relationships between deprivation and achievement and between widening participation and raising standards?	Differential achievement: to investigate the relationships between outcomes for different groups of relatively disadvantaged students and college practice
How can value-added methods be applied to vocational qualifications.	Value added in GNVQ and GNVQ precursors: to explore the relationships between qualifications at start of programme and student outcomes and develop robust value-added methodologies for formative and summative purposes
Measures of quality: how should we measure the effectiveness of the learning pathway or college-level policy and leadership in raising student achievement?	These issues will be explored pragmatically within the various strands of the *Raising quality and achievement* project
What is the relationship between classroom-level interactions and student achievement in further education?	This is the most central and most difficult of all questions. It is being addressed specifically in the best practice networks and development projects and in the *Spotlight on learning* work mentioned on page 11.

Further information

FEDA and AoC are keeping all colleges informed about the raising achievement project through a series of mailings and reports.

The FEDA publications mentioned in this report are available from: FEDA publications, Citadel Place, Tinworth Street, London, SE11 5EH. Tel: 0207 840 5402/4 Fax: 020 7840 5401 e-mail: publications@feda.ac.uk

Correspondence about this report is welcome. Please contact: Paul Martinez, FEDA East Midlands Region Office, Robins Wood House, Robins Wood Road, Nottingham NG8 3NH. e-mail: pmartine@feda.ac.uk

FEDA maintains two separate mailing lists for value-added and retention and achievement. Please send your details to Paul Martinez to be included on either or both lists.

References and further reading

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What do we mean by achievement in further education? Where have we got to? Can we rely on the data? How high should we aim? What is emerging from research into effective practice? How does FEDA's work fit in? Aiming at achievement is a brief interim report on FEDA's research into improving student achievement, especially within a framework that equates achievement with qualifications. It includes examples of successful practice.

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